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ABSTRACT

Since the 1996 Oakland School Board decision regarding the use of Ebonics as a tool of instruction, opinions have clashed over whether Ebonics is a separate language or merely a dialect of English. Called Black Vernacular English (BVE) in the 1960s and 70s and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the 1980s and 90s, Ebonics has traditionally been considered a dialect of English by educators and linguists. To understand why Ebonics might be considered a language other than English requires a closer look at what it takes to make a language, as well as what the differences are between a language and a dialect. The following questions are discussed: What does it take to make a language? Is Ebonic bad English? Is Ebonic a language or a dialect? and Why consider Ebonic a separate language? (Contains a Resources on Ebonics Section with 23 Web and print sources.) (VWL)

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Ebonic Need Not Be English

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Ebonic Need Not Be English

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Since the 1996 Oakland School Board decision regarding the use of Ebonics as a tool of instruction, opinions have clashed over whether Ebonics is a separate language or merely a dialect of English. Called Black Vernacular English (BVE) in the 1960s and 70s and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the 1980s and 90s, Ebonics has traditionally been considered a dialect of English by educators and linguists (e.g., Fromkin & Rodman, 1998; Tshudi & Thomas, 1998). To understand why Ebonics might be considered a language other than English requires a closer look at what it takes to make a language, as well as what the differences are between a language and a dialect.

First, I would like to point out that the term *Ebonics* is not an appropriate name for a linguistic entity. However, the coinage is actually very close to a natural way of naming languages. There are languages that end in "-ic," like Arabic and Amharic, as well as language family names of that form, like Slavic and Germanic. *Ebonic*, in such a naming system, is a clear way to specify *black language*. Thus, in this paper, I use the term *Ebonic*.

What Does It Take to Make a Language?

Linguists generally agree that the notion of a language is largely, or entirely, social and political. What it takes to make a language is not a set of structural linguistic properties or lack of intelligibility with related linguistic systems, but rather the conviction that the linguistic system in question is a symbol of nationalist or ethnic identity. There are cases around the world of the two logical possibilities—cases in which mutually unintelligible linguistic varieties belong to the same language and others where mutually intelligible varieties are separate languages. For example, the dialects of Chinese are distinct from each other, at least as much so as the modern Romance languages. Yet they remain dialects of the Chinese language. The constellation of languages that includes Dutch, Flemish, and Afrikaans is a case of the other type. Each of these languages is easily understood by speakers of the others. Yet for most Afrikaners, Afrikaans is certainly neither Dutch nor Flemish, but a new language that grew from the South African soil. Nor are many Belgian Flemings inclined to accept Flemish as a dialect of Dutch. These examples suggest that linguistically similar varieties can be languages if they are identified with different countries. The Nguni language family of South Africa shows that linguistically similar varieties can be separate languages even if they are spoken within the same country. There are four Nguni languages—Xhosa, Zulu, Swati, and Ndebele—each of which is generally reported to be readily understood by speakers of the others. Nevertheless, proposals to unify the languages of this group into a single standard language have been resisted, largely because of a general belief that the languages to be unified are each languages in their own right.

There is, therefore, no linguistic or geographical reason that Ebonic could not achieve status as a language distinct from English. Two objections that are likely to be raised are that 1) Ebonic is not a language, but rather English corrupted by bad grammar and excessive slang, and 2) Ebonic and English are too similar to each other to be different languages.

Is Ebonic Bad English?

The idea that Ebonic is very bad English is obviously false to linguists who have studied it in detail (e.g., Mufwene, Rickford, Bailey, & Baugh, 1998; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). Outside the realm of academic linguistics, however, the idea that Ebonic is bad English is generally held to be uncontroversially true. Hence, it is necessary to demonstrate that this notion is untenable. It is clear on examination that Ebonic, far from being bad English, is actually superior to English in one of its subsystems, the verbal tense-aspect system. In addition to the verb structure that English also has, Ebonic provides its speakers with rich resources for making distinctions among kinds and times of actions and states that can be made in English only awkwardly through use of a longer and more awkward expression. For example, Ebonic has several aspect markers; one is the habitual, exemplified below.

She be eatin/She do be eatin.
She is sometimes/usually/always eating.

She don't be eatin.
She is not sometimes/usually/always eating.

These forms are often used as illustrations that Ebonic is simply corrupt English. The habitual is invariably used ungrammatically in such illustrations, where it is taken as a corruption of "She is eating." Of course, the habitual progressive in Ebonic contrasts with the present progressive, which would be "She eatin" or, under emphasis, "She is eatin." It also contrasts with the simple present. It would be perfectly reasonable, for example, for an Ebonic speaker to say, "She not writin' right now but she be writin' mostly every day and she write good." This would mean that the person referred to is not in the process of writing at the moment, but that one would find her in the process of writing almost daily, and she characteristically writes well.

Such verb forms are frequently cited as evidence of slovenly English. Under analysis, however, they are shown to fit into an impressive verbal system that functions more efficiently than the English system does. Once this becomes clear, it is amazing to see Ebonic presented as inferior to English. The three-way distinction in Ebonic among the present, the present progressive, and the habitual progressive contrasts

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with a more limited two-way distinction between the present and present progressive in English.

Is Ebonic a Language or a Dialect?

The second objection, that Ebonic and English are too similar to be different languages, is overtly or tacitly considered valid even by linguists. This argument is also faulty. To demonstrate, we can look at another speech system that is very similar to English, Scots. One of the three languages of Scotland, Scots is a Germanic language that was once the language of the court and that has largely been displaced by English. Because of its relatedness to English, Scots is now considered by many in Scotland to be a corrupted dialect of English, a similar attitude to the one directed toward Ebonic in the United States. The differences between Scots and English seem comparable to those between Ebonic and English, as the following example, from a World Wide Web site maintained by Clive P.L. Young (www.umist.ac.uk/UMIST_CAL / Scots /haunbuik.htm), illustrates:

> The wirdleet kivvers aboot 700 o the maist cowmon wirds in onie leid (A wisna luikin fur jist kenspeckle Scots wirds). The spellins come frae the School Scots Dictionary. A warnin thou, the file is muckle an maun tak a wee tae doonload.
>
> *(The word list covers about 700 of the most common words in any language (I wasn't just looking for well-known Scots words). The spellings are from the School Scots Dictionary. A warning, though, the file is large and may take a while to download.)*

To the naive eye, the Scots version for the most part looks like English badly spelled. There are a few vocabulary differences, like "kenspeckle," "leid," and "muckle," but most of the excerpt contains words that are close cognates of English words. Historically, and in the view of present-day activists, however, Scots is not a degenerate form of English, but a language distinct from English. Merlin Press, a small publishing house that puts out instructional materials for teaching Scots, has posted the following questions and answers on its World Wide Web site (www.sol.co.uk/m/merlinpress/):

Q. In what form does Scots exist in the present day?

A. It exists in a multiplicity of dialect forms but without a Standard Scots to correspond to Standard English. There is nothing linguistically wrong with the forms of Scots we have, but for political and social reasons our children have been discouraged from using them for nearly three hundred years, on the grounds that they are incorrect, inferior or corrupt forms of English.

Q. Isn't Scots just a form of slang?

A. Absolutely not. When teaching Scots, one of your first tasks will be to show children the difference between Scots and slang.

Q. What is the best way to teach Scots in the classroom?

A. The best way is to start with what you have: The children themselves hear Scots every day, and many of them actually speak it without realising it. Start by recognising this and allowing its use in the classroom.

To those who followed the Ebonics debate, this discussion has an almost eerie familiarity. Scots has to be defended from charges that it is an incorrect form of English and just slang. Children grow up speaking Scots but are discouraged from using it. The suggestion in answer to the question, "What is the best way to teach Scots in the classroom?" is almost identical to the proposal by the Oakland School Board that provoked the furor in late 1996 and early 1997, except that the Oakland Board proposed the use of Ebonic in the classroom as a bridge to English.

We can see the case of Scots as an example of a linguistic variety viewed by some as a corrupted dialect of English but also having status as a language. As a language, Scots has important advantages over Ebonic. It has its own recognized grammar and dictionary. It is taught as a subject at several of Scotland's oldest universities. While not widely taught at the primary and secondary school levels, it is not considered outrageous to teach Scots in these schools, and there are published materials for use in teaching it.

On the other hand, Ebonic has one great advantage over Scots. It appears that without successful efforts to maintain and revive it, Scots is in danger of dying out completely in a few generations. Ebonic—in spite of almost universal opinion against it and a total lack of support in the educational system—is one of the most robustly maintained minority languages in existence. There is no hint that it is in any danger of dying out in the foreseeable future.

Why Consider Ebonic a Separate Language?

I have argued that Ebonic need not be English, but that instead there is every reason to suppose it is capable of being a language in its own right. There are several advantages to considering Ebonic a language separate from English rather than as an orderly and systematic dialect of English. The major advantage is that when one speaks of Ebonic as a language, rather than as a dialect, it reforms the discourse in a way that makes it easier to address the common misconceptions about Ebonic that have kept the debate at such an uninformed level. To begin with, when Ebonic is defended as a systematic and well-ordered dialect, it is inevitably contrasted with *standard* English. The concept *standard* has two meanings: minimum standards and arbitrary standards. Minimum standards are specifications that must be met for acceptability. Safety standards for automobiles are one example. If an automobile does not have the designated safety features, it fails the standards, and the manufacturer will not be able to sell it. In short, minimum standards must be met in order for an item to be good enough. Arbitrary standards are entirely different. For example, the United States uses Fahrenheit degrees to measure temperatures. Most of the rest of the world measures temperatures in degrees Celsius. One could argue that the Fahrenheit system is the inferior system. However that may be, Fahrenheit degrees serve an important function. They serve as an agreed-upon arbitrary standard that everyone in the United States understands and uses. It is not so important that the best system of temperature measurement be used as it is that everyone agree on the same arbitrary standard.

When linguists use the term *standard language*, they invariably and implicitly mean an arbitrary standard. Just as in the case of the measurement standard for temperature, there are advantages to having agreement on certain arbitrary standards for some language uses. The standard language may not be the best possible constellation of linguistic features available. In fact, I have argued that in some ways standard English is demonstrably inferior to Ebonic. But just as there is general agreement in favor of the Fahrenheit standard, the arbitrary standards we have agreed on for American English are unlikely to be abandoned any time soon. It is general social acceptance that creates a workable arbitrary standard, not the inherent superiority of the item it specifies.

However, the assumption made by the vast majority of people who have not studied the nature of language in depth is that the term *standard English* refers to minimum standards. Just like a house that fails to meet building code standards, nonstandard language is considered not fit to be used. The users of these dialects must, in this view, be brought up to the minimum standard, for their own good as well as for the good of the society in general.

Another problem involves the term *dialect*. For linguists, dialects are speech varieties that make up a language, somewhat the way slices make up a pie. For the general public, though, a dialect is a perhaps quaint but surely faulty way of speaking a language. In that sense, it is on a par with slips of the tongue, slang-laced conversation, excessive use of profanity, and other perceived abuses of language. The linguist's view is quite different. For linguists, there are several levels of analysis of a language, each just a different view of the same phenomenon. The language is the largest level, but it can be viewed in greater detail as the dialects of which it is composed, and these, in turn, can be more closely examined as the various styles of each dialect.

When linguists refer to Ebonic as a dialect of English, they intend to make a simple-to-understand statement that the dialect Ebonic is one of a number of equally orderly dialects of English, including the standard one. It is not comparable to slurred speech or slips of the tongue, which lie at a much lower level of language analysis. The non-linguist, though, hears the word dialect and interprets it in this way. Because dialects are presupposed to be corruptions of language, the claim that Ebonic is orderly and rule-governed can hardly make sense. The linguist's analysis will make no dent in the non-linguist's conviction that anyone who is able to speak only a dialect has an immediate need to replace the dialect with the real language. This person will never hear that the linguist is actually saying that the dialect Ebonic is on a par with the standardized dialect and, given different historical developments, might even have been the standard.

For linguists to attempt to convey what we have learned about Ebonic using terms like *standard English* and *African-American English dialect* starts us off immediately with a double handicap. Somehow, we have to dislodge the idea of minimum standard as applied to language and replace it with the concept of arbitrary standard. At the same time, we have to redefine dialect, moving away from the notion of dialect as a corruption of the real language to a notion of dialect as a legitimate component of all languages. On the other hand, if Ebonic were a language and not a dialect, it would not be assumed to be a corruption of anything. A language has its own standards. The standards of some other language are simply irrelevant. The way we discuss these matters would immediately change. Imagine the following hypothetical conversations:

Q: Isn't Ebonic just bad English?

Linguist: Certainly Ebonic is bad English, in the same sense that French is bad English. English is bad Ebonic, too.

Q: Why don't these so-called Ebonic speakers inflect the verb "to be." Why do they say "He be eatin" when they mean "He is eating?"

Linguist: Unlike English which has only one form for "to be," Ebonic has two words for "to be." One of them is inflected and the other is not. The grammar of Ebonic makes a distinction not found in English. The difference is quite subtle and not easy for English speakers to master.

Conclusion

Simply speaking of Ebonic as a language rather than a dialect will not immediately cause linguists' discoveries about Ebonic to become universally accepted. There would be massive resistance to the idea that Ebonic is a language. Even if by dint of charisma and eloquence linguists manage to convince some non-linguists that Ebonic could be a language, the struggle would not be over. However, I would find the new struggle easier to deal with. I know that, at least in teaching my own students, I have been able to get across the linguistic perception of the nature of Ebonic much more efficiently by framing its relation to English as one of language to language.

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This digest is a synthesis of a paper presented at the Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC, May 7, 1999. To read more about current views on and writings about Ebonics, see CAL's Web resource collection on this topic at www.cal.org/public/topic/dialects.htm.

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Resources on Ebonics

Web Resources

The following Web sites contain scholarly articles about the features and uses of Ebonics, newspaper and magazine articles, and collections of resolutions about dialects in general and Ebonics in particular written by organizations and professional associations.

- Center for Applied Linguistics Ebonics Information Page www.cal.org/ebonics
- The Linguist List Ebonics Page linguist.emich.edu/topics/ebonics/
- John Rickford's Writings on the Ebonics Issue www.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/
- LSA Resolution on the Oakland "Ebonics" Issue www.lsadc.org/ebonics.html

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